



## Recent Research on Teaching History in Northern Ireland: Informing Curriculum Change

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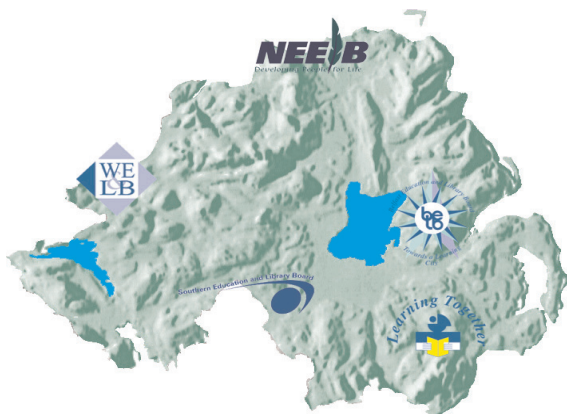


University of Ulster

**UNESCO Centre**

# Recent Research on Teaching History in Northern Ireland: Informing Curriculum Change

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## CONTENTS

Introduction: Alan McCully	1
Reflections on the teaching of history in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland from 1984 to 2006: Daniel McCall	3
Historical Memory, Ethnonationalism and Peacebuilding in a Divided Society: The Teaching of History and Group Identity in Northern Ireland: Margaret Smith	8
Primary children's understanding of history in Northern Ireland and the United States: Keith C. Barton	11
Northern Ireland primary students' understanding of historical time: Keith C. Barton	14
Northern Ireland secondary students' judgments of historical significance: Keith C. Barton	16
National Identity and the History Curriculum in Northern Ireland: Alan McCully and Keith C. Barton	18
An exploration of Teaching and Learning Sensitive Issues in History: a comparative study of schools in Northern Ireland and Oxford at Secondary Level: Margaret Conway	22
Teaching history in Northern Ireland: creating an oasis of calm?: Alison Kitson	26
Presenting the Past or Shaping the Future: An Investigation into Current Issues in Post-primary History Education: Catherine Thompson	30
Complementary or contradictory? History teachers' views on school History and the introduction of Local and Global Citizenship into the Northern Ireland Curriculum: John McCombe	33
Teachers, Students, and History Education in Northern Ireland: a commentary on the research studies: Keith C. Barton	37



## Introduction

**Alan McCully**, University of Ulster

The impetus for this publication has come from two sources. The first arises from my perception of a gap between the stated intentions of the current Northern Ireland History Curriculum and a significant number of the practitioners charged with its teaching. I first became convinced of this when acting as rapporteur at a Council of Europe history teaching seminar held in Carrickfergus in 1997. The history curriculum as introduced in 1990 provided teachers with a remit to address the community divisions in Northern Ireland through history teaching (and was being portrayed as such to our foreign visitors) yet it was obvious that, at least among the local teachers represented, there was no consensus as to the appropriateness of this aim. It has been my view ever since a forum be created whereby the history teaching community in the province can engage in informed debate on the nature and purpose of their craft in a society emerging from conflict. Such a debate appears even more necessary at a time when in-service provision is gathering momentum for the introduction of the Pathways curriculum that even more prominently emphasises a social utilitarian role for history in our classrooms. Otherwise, there is a possibility of teacher resistance to

what may be perceived by some as a distortion of the discipline for social ends.

The second motivation for this initiative comes from the frustrations of engaging in educational research. Too easily, researchers find themselves presenting their work to each other far removed from the contexts where the education of young people actually occurs. Yet, I am convinced of the importance of practice being informed by systematic study rather than on the hunches of practitioners or curriculum developers. More effective lines of communication require to be established between researchers and teachers. Thus, this publication has drawn together summaries of recent research into history teaching in Northern Ireland in the hope that it might both stimulate a long overdue professional debate and provide a context for history departments preparing for September, 2007 and beyond. To help in that regard I have included two further contributions. Dan McCall has provided a preface in which he gives his personal reflections of over twenty years in the Educational Inspectorate, DENI and Professor Keith Barton of the University of Cincinnati, a regular visitor here, casts his analytical mind across the

summaries to provide an overview of their significance for policy and practice.

In his commentary Professor Barton acknowledges how lucky we are to teach history here precisely because reference to the past plays such an important part in people's lives. He also applauds the significant strengths exhibited through our provision and practice. This booklet is published in the spirit of building on our strengths but also reflecting on our limitations. For some the new curriculum may present daunting challenges yet practice is already emerging that takes the learning outcomes of the new history programme into practice and draws connections with Local and Global Citizenship. I reference, for example, the Inter-Board History Panel's adaptation of the work of *Facing History and Ourselves* and

three recent articles in *Teaching History*<sup>1</sup>. My view is that we are, again, on the verge of exciting developments and that the changes proposed offer us the opportunity to re-establish full professional autonomy after years of a prescribed curriculum.

Finally, I wish to thank all the contributors for giving up their time so freely and the Inter-Board History Panel for backing the project. I am especially grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for their financial support, thus again demonstrating their commitment to education in Northern Ireland.

**Alan McCully, Editor**

University of Ulster at Coleraine  
February, 2007

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2. McCully A. and Pilgrim N. "They took Ireland away from us and we have to fight to get it back": Using fictional characters to explore the relationship between historical interpretation and contemporary attitudes', *Teaching History* 114, 2004, pp. 17-21.
3. McCully A., Pilgrim N., Sutherland A. and McMinn T. "Don't worry, Mr. Trimble, we can handle it" : balancing the emotional with the rational in teaching of contentious topics, *Teaching History*, 106, 2002, pp 6-12.

## Reflections on the teaching of history in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland from 1984 to 2006

**Daniel McCall**

The strengths of the teaching of history in Northern Ireland remain largely as they were described in the Inspectorate's paper "Improving History in Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland", published by the Department of Education in 2001. The strengths noted in that report centred on the popularity and strength of the subject, especially at key stage 4 (KS4) and at GCE A level; the soundness of much of the teaching which, in the main, focuses in a balanced manner on developing the pupils' interpretive, analytical and evaluative skills; and, particularly in those schools where the standard of teaching is good or better, the pupils' knowledge and understanding of significant historical concepts, their general knowledge and understanding of key events, and their awareness that historical explanation is often provisional and frequently contested.

Standards at GCSE and at GCE A level have improved, as is reflected, for example, in the increase in the percentage of grades A to C attained in A level between 1992 to 1995; during these years, the percentage of grades A to C in history increased from 60.2% in 1992 to 86.2% in 2005.

Teachers of history are also responding increasingly well to

opportunities to adapt Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to benefit teaching and learning in history. While much still remains to be done to integrate more completely the benefits of ICT into the teaching of history, sound progress has been made.

In addition to these major strengths, it is also important to recognise and acknowledge the contribution of history teachers in Northern Ireland to providing their pupils with an objective view of history, especially the history of these islands, during those decades when civil unrest was at its most intense.

The areas for improvement also remain much as they were in 2001 and include issues related to generic teaching skills and also to history-specific matters. While acknowledging the skill and effort necessary to plan for, and address, the particular requirements of individual pupils, and of groups of pupils, it will be important that teachers of history address more effectively, in their written planning and in their practice, the differing needs of pupils across the full range of ability. This extends also to the need to improve the marking of the pupils' work to identify more clearly the strengths of that work, and also to identify and remedy



its deficiencies. Addressing successfully the latter will require a more systematic approach to classroom management and the ability to make a clearer and more explicit response to individual difference within a whole-class situation.

There is often a significant gap between the effort history teachers make to impart historical knowledge and understanding to their pupils, across the full 11 to 18 range, and the extent to which the pupils can provide their teachers with evidence that they have developed a sound knowledge and understanding of the same. Consequently, teachers should address, in a more explicit manner, the extent to which their pupils' knowledge and understanding of history matches what their teachers have been at pains to teach them, and, should there be a difference in relation to what the pupils have retained, it will be particularly important that the teachers take action to address directly and effectively the deficiencies in their pupils' learning.

Furthermore, teachers of history in Northern Ireland have not yet resolved successfully enough the balance which needs to be struck between depth and detail and developing in their pupils a strong and accurate sense of historical time, change and continuity, and how the past has influenced the present. Depth of content continues to be over-emphasised

to the detriment of a broader overview of history.

Consequently, relatively few pupils, especially at KS3, can explain adequately historical themes and patterns across time, historical continuity and change, and chronological change. A minority of pupils, particularly the lower attaining, still receive a fragmented and partial experience of history which leaves them poorly positioned to understand how the past has influenced the present and how it might shape the future.

For teachers of history, there continues to be the challenge of striking an appropriate balance between teaching history to lower-attaining pupils, and using history as a vehicle to develop and improve these pupils' literacy and numeracy competences.

Across the last three decades, education in Northern Ireland has had to respond to the Government's improvement agenda. Most obviously directed at whole-school improvement, the pressure for improvement, and for further improvement, has also involved history departments in responding to the many curricular initiatives introduced since the early 1980s. The impact of the reform of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC), introduced from 1989, has been especially significant for teachers of history. While the gains have been considerable, not least in ensuring that pupils have access to a

largely common history curriculum, the NIC has also brought significant challenges to teachers of history, and more are likely to follow the introduction of a revised NIC from September 2007. In KS3, and especially in the last five to seven years, history programmes have lacked freshness and relevancy as teachers work year after year with the same topics, approaches and resources. Part of the problem has been the prevalence of the widely-held (though erroneous) view that the NIC introduced from 1989 required especially depth of treatment and, consequently, many teachers of history (in good faith) focused on depth studies and detail while relatively limited attention was given to ensuring a more judicious balance of depth studies allied to an overview treatment of history, and consideration of key events and trends beyond these islands.

Disturbingly, in most history departments, and for many pupils in KS3 - especially those who do not opt for history in KS4 - history "stops" in the trenches of the western front in 1916. Few pupils in year 10 have much, if any, opportunity to consider at least some of the major issues of the 20th and of the early 21st centuries. For most, history in KS3 involves the (often detailed) treatment of 1066, the voyages of discovery, Henry VIII, Mary of Scots, the Armada, and, for example, the development of Unionism and Nationalism in

Ireland. Interesting and significant as these events are, the extensive and in-depth treatment they receive ensures that little time is available to explore other issues and themes. It will be especially important that, given the opportunities which should follow the introduction of a revised history curriculum from September 2007, at least some new topics and themes are introduced to inject increased freshness, breadth and relevance into the KS3 programme (in particular), and that the all pupils acquire a much greater understanding of how the past has influenced the present, and issues arising.

Over the last ten or so years, as Northern Ireland has moved from conflict to something better, the two main communities have not yet resolved their differences and have not yet arrived at a position where each has sufficient knowledge and understanding of the other's cultural and historical traditions. In addition, the migration to Northern Ireland of people from other countries has created further concerns as evidence of racism has compounded the sectarianism that, for many, has been too characteristic of Northern Ireland society as a whole. The challenge and opportunity for education is considerable, and not least for teachers of history. During the decades of "The Troubles", there was an understandable desire that schools

should provide pupils with a safe haven away from the tension and fear of the streets. Furthermore, many teachers of history were understandably uncomfortable in bringing to the attention of their pupils controversial and contested issues relating to British and Irish history, especially those issues which were central to each community's perception of its own cherished past. Other imperatives now apply, not least the emergence of Citizenship in the curriculum, and there is a strong case to be advanced that teachers of history should be much more proactive in raising with their pupils sensitive and contested issues relating to the history, culture and traditions of the two main communities in Northern Ireland, not to proselytise or "to improve community relations" but to ensure that pupils have a better knowledge and awareness of how key events in Irish and British history are perceived by each community, and how the past continues to be interpreted on the streets of Northern Ireland.

In addition, teachers of history should take advantage of a more flexible curriculum, notably at KS3, and in relation to the development of vocational education at KS4, to seek opportunities to promote further the study of history. The history of these islands provide numerable opportunities, for instance, for pupils to consider the impact of historic migration, and to reflect on issues arising in

respect of changing demographics as a consequence of contemporary migration. Furthermore, teachers of history may well have something to offer to pupils unimpressed by an academic curriculum but interested in a more vocational and practical curriculum. It was unfortunate, some ten or so years ago, that most teachers of history felt that they had little or nothing to contribute to the introduction of GNVQ programmes in leisure and tourism in KS4, despite the obvious linkages with museums, art galleries, local heritage centres and so on. The field was, in effect, left to teachers of geography. It will be important that teachers of history do not turn away from new opportunities in the future to widen the appeal and application of history and to develop their subject.

There was a time when school-based history was in danger in Northern Ireland, notably in the 1970s prior to the emergence of the Schools Council History Project, and again in the mid to late 1980s when serious concerns were expressed about history's ability to withstand competition in KS4 from business studies and from geography, especially – but not only – in the non-selective sector.

These days have gone and, in this first decade of the 21st century, school-based history is well placed and reasonably secure, but it is important that nothing is taken for

granted and that the subject continues to develop and appeal to a more demanding and discerning age and ability range.

School-based history needs to continue to demonstrate its relevance, significance and vitality. The past, and issues arising from differing interpretations of the past, are too important to be neglected, and it is essential that history teachers continue to convince their pupils that history matters.

# Historical Memory, Ethnonationalism and Peacebuilding in a Divided Society: The Teaching of History and Group Identity in Northern Ireland

Margaret Smith, American University Washington

## Source of Published Findings

Reckoning with the Past: Teaching History in Northern Ireland  
Lanham, Maryland, USA:  
Lexington Books, 2005.

## Funding

The research for this book was originally done for a doctoral thesis at Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA, 1999. Funding for the doctoral research came from the William Donner Foundation's grant to the Security Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, the British Council, and the Hewlett Foundation's grant to the on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Harvard University. Further funding for the completion of the book came from research grants from the Washington Semester at American University.

## Research Questions

Overall question:

How can history teaching support conflict reduction in deeply divided societies?

- What is required to bring about a change in the teaching of history in such a society?
- What pitfalls and difficulties arise?
- Where are the limits, or

stalling points, in such an exercise?

- To what degree can changes be made while the society is still contested?
- Do differing long term political visions determine differing strategies for revising history teaching?
- To what degree do teachers help or hinder reform?
- What are teachers' views about the role of history teaching in a contested society?

## Rationale

Given the generalised belief that differing, mythologised historical accounts contribute to conflict in deeply divided societies, how can the teaching of history be used, instead, to create better understanding and concord? Much of the literature in this area critiques textbooks that contain untruths or promote mythologies and amnesias. But little literature exists on what it is like actually to attempt to change this. The book is an anthropology of Northern Ireland's history teaching reform, demonstrating the variety of projects relating to the teaching of history, and the myriad of issues that arise when attempts are made to reshape history teaching.

## Methodology

Data was derived from existing research on history education in Northern Ireland and from seventy-two qualitative interviews, thirty-six of which were with policy makers, historians and researchers, and thirty-six of which were with post-primary school history teachers representing a cross section of schools in Northern Ireland. In the interviews with teachers, a questionnaire was used. While the sampling of teachers was undoubtedly skewed towards the more open-minded because these were the ones more willing to be interviewed, a summary of the responses to open-ended questions, which can be found in the Appendix to the doctoral thesis, yields anecdotal evidence on teachers' views and attitudes.

The methodology adopted for this research was based on Glaser and Straus's ideas about "grounded theory," where theory is developed during the research process and tested in subsequent stages of the research.

## Main Findings

The research for the thesis and book develops theory linking history education to differing political and constitutional visions of a multinational society and demonstrating its potential to assist in these various political projects.

- 1) Assertion of control by one group
- 2) Challenging control of the dominant group
- 3) Promoting a "neutral, civic" culture, which would include the idea of a "common history"
- 4) Emphasising alternative identities in order to try to reduce the salience of the most strongly felt identifications
- 5) Reframing the group narratives so that the two communities can legitimate rather than negate each other.

Reformers in Northern Ireland have concentrated their efforts on building a civic culture, emphasising inductive methodologies and critical debate in history classrooms and encouraging the development of citizenship education with an emphasis on human rights and common values for a liberal democratic culture.

Moves to make the recent history of Northern Ireland a compulsory module at GCSE 1994 led to a compromise whereby teachers could choose between teaching "Northern Ireland Since 1965" or "Northern Ireland in World War Two." Teachers sidestepped teaching a "common history," which demonstrates that a deeply divided society is extremely

resistant to a “common history” even in the best of conditions. The research suggests, therefore, that people rebuilding a polity in the wake of protracted identity conflict must somehow find a way to respect the differences in the narratives of the groups involved, not by abandoning the notion of objective truth, but by recognising that history was experienced by different groups differently, so the salience of events is different for different groups.

Some examples of information gleaned from the teacher interviews: four fifths of those asked whether history teaching has a responsibility to help improve relations between the communities said that it does. At the same time of those asked whether history teaching can alter ideas pupils have acquired at home, two thirds responded “No” or “Not Really.” This paradox gives insight into the dilemma teachers in Northern Ireland feel about their work.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Adopting the kind of teaching that recognises the experience of the respective groups is difficult to do – indeed this is a frontier of discovery that lies ahead for all of history teaching, not just Northern Ireland, though indications that this approach is emerging can now be seen. The danger is that because the task is difficult it will be abandoned, and history classes will give way to business and

technical subjects on the timetable. Such a policy would be unfortunate, as history classes are an important way for young people not only to learn how to discuss the past in a divided society, but to learn the skills of research, debate and critical thinking that are important for a liberal democracy.

From a policy perspective, therefore, the research implies that history remains an important subject in the timetable and should not be sidelined due to pressure of new subjects.

From a teaching perspective, the research encourages a variety of forms of history teaching building on what has already been done in Northern Ireland. It recognises that lessons on “how the past is used in the present” are beginning to introduce students to a discourse about the significance of history for group identity in the present, and that museums demonstrating differing accounts of historical events, or differing uses of symbols in the various communities, help students to understand that difference is a matter worth exploring for its own sake, and not something that needs to create discomfort.

The research underlines the crucial importance of teacher training for revising history teaching, along with revised textbooks, curriculum, and external examinations.



# Primary children's understanding of history in Northern Ireland and the United States

**Keith C. Barton**, University of Cincinnati

## Funding

German Marshall Fund of the United States; Cincinnati Branch of the English-Speaking Union; School of Education, University of Ulster, Coleraine

## Source of Published Findings

Barton, K. C. (2001). "You'd be wanting to know about the past": Social contexts of children's historical understanding in Northern Ireland and the United States. *Comparative Education*, 37, 89-106.

Barton, K. C. (2001). Primary children's understanding of the role of historical evidence: Comparisons between the United States and Northern Ireland. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 1(2), 21-30. Available online at <http://www.centres.ex.ac.uk/historyresource/journal2/journalstart.htm>

Barton, K. C. (2001). A sociocultural perspective on children's understanding of historical change: Comparative findings from Northern Ireland and the United States. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 881-913.

## Research Questions

Where have primary students in Northern Ireland learned about history, and how do they understand

- 1 the purpose of the subject,
- 2 the sources of historical knowledge, and
- 3 the nature of change over time? How do their ideas compare to those of students in the United States?

## Rationale

Although it is widely accepted that social context influences historical understanding, few prior studies had systematically investigated the nature of this relationship. This study sought to uncover the role of societal factors in children's historical understanding through a direct comparison of the ideas of students in Northern Ireland and the United States.

## Methodology

Data were collected primarily through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 121 students, aged 6 to 12, at Controlled, Maintained, and Integrated schools in rural Northern Ireland. Students were shown pictures from the past, asked to arrange them in chronological order, to explain the reasons for their placements, and to estimate the approximate time period of each. This was followed by more general questions about



history; these included asking what aspects of life had changed over time and why, how people know how life was different in the past, why history is important, and where students had learned about the past. Interview data were supplemented by several months of primary classroom observation and participation in other history-related activities, such as teacher preparation programmes and visits to historic sites. Comparisons were made to previous research in the United States that used similar methods.

### **Main Findings**

Students in Northern Ireland and the United States have learned about history from similar sources—not only at school but from relatives, museums and historic sites, and print and electronic media. In both countries, students begin learning about history from a young age and consider themselves historically knowledgeable, interested, and aware. The content of the history that primary students learn in the two locations, however, differs considerably: In the United States, students generally learn a narrative of national development, with little attention to the evidence for historical accounts, while those in Northern Ireland are more likely to encounter information on the social and material life of people in distant times and places, including attention to artifacts and other sources. Students in the two

countries develop differing ideas about history that are consistent with these approaches:

1. Students in the United States see history's purpose in terms of providing a sense of national identity, while those in Northern Ireland think that history should help them learn about people different than themselves. Notably, primary students in Northern Ireland made few references to Unionist or Nationalist narratives of history.
2. Students in Northern Ireland have a more well-developed understanding of the role of evidence in developing historical accounts, and of the variety of sources of evidence, than those in the United States, although students in both countries had limited understanding of the use of written sources.
3. Students in Northern Ireland are more likely than those in the United States to explain historical events and changes in terms of larger social and economic systems, while those in the United States tend to rely on narratives of individual achievement and motivation that lead to social and material progress.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

1. Educators in Northern Ireland should be able to build on students' historical interest and knowledge rather than thinking that they are "blank slates" when it comes to history or that their historical understanding is dominated by sectarian narratives. At the same time, educators may want to consider whether developing a shared sense of identity—one that transcends the community divide—should become an explicit goal of the curriculum.
2. Educators may want to devote more attention to exposing primary students not only to artifacts and images but to written historical sources as a way of understanding the past. This might better prepare students for the more frequent use of written sources at the secondary level.
3. Educators in Northern Ireland may wish to consider whether the kinds of historical understanding developed through period-based historical units—such as the focus on social and economic context—sufficiently develops students' understanding of overarching historical themes that go beyond single time periods.

# Northern Ireland primary students' understanding of historical time

**Keith C. Barton**, University of Cincinnati

## Funding

German Marshall Fund of the United States; Cincinnati Branch of the English-Speaking Union; School of Education, University of Ulster, Coleraine

## Source of Published Findings

Barton, K. C. (2002). "Oh, that's a tricky piece!": Children, mediated action, and the tools of historical time. *Elementary School Journal*, 103, 161-185.

## Research Questions

What activities do students perform when working with the chronological dimensions of historical materials, and what knowledge and procedures do they use in making sense of historical time?

## Rationale

Previous research in both the United Kingdom and the United States had shown that students as young as 6 years old have an understanding of historical time, but most studies had interpreted students' ideas in terms of individual cognition. This study sought to examine how students use culturally situated knowledge and procedures to work with the chronological dimensions of historical materials.

## Methodology

Data were collected primarily through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 117 students, aged 6 to 12, at Controlled, Maintained, and Integrated schools in rural Northern Ireland. Students were shown pictures from the past, asked to arrange them in chronological order, to explain the reasons for their placements, and to estimate the approximate time period of each. This was followed by more general questions about history; these included asking what aspects of life had changed over time and why, how people know how life was different in the past, why history is important, and where students had learned about the past.

## Main Findings

In working with historical images, students engaged in three distinct activities:

- 1.They sequenced images in chronological order (with a high degree of accuracy);
- 2.They grouped them chronologically, either with each other or with other historical events, periods, or dates with which they were familiar;
- 3.They measured the chronological distance of images from each other or from the present.

In order to perform these activities, students relied on four culturally situated “tools”:

1. historical knowledge, usually related to social and material life (used when they knew the dates or order of given images);
2. direct experience (when they could compare images to their own memories of information from relatives);
3. examples of progress and development (i.e., bigger buildings are more recent than smaller ones);
4. anchoring and adjustment (in which they counted backward from known dates).

These findings indicate that students do not have an internal “perception” of historical time that develops as they get older; rather, time and chronology involve complex and multifaceted activities, and facility with these activities depends on students’ developing appropriation of a variety of strategies for sequencing, grouping, and measuring time.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

Rather than waiting for students’ understanding of historical time to develop, educators should provide primary students with a variety of time-related experiences that will lead them to develop more complete ideas about historical time, and they should explicitly call students’ attention to the temporal dimensions of historical materials. In doing so, educators should keep three principles in mind:

1. Students’ experiences should focus at least in part on social and material life, because these are the aspects of history they find most useful in making sense of time;
2. Students’ experiences should include attention to a variety of time periods, because the more periods they know about, the better foundation they have for making judgments about time;
3. When learning about a given period, students need direct information on the chronological dimensions of that period—not only the date(s) associated with the period, but where it stands in relation to other times (i.e., what periods and events came before and after the period, what was going on at the same time, and how long ago it was before the present).

## Northern Ireland secondary students' judgments of historical significance

**Keith C. Barton**, University of Cincinnati

### Funding

German Marshall Fund of the United States; Cincinnati Branch of the English-Speaking Union; School of Education, University of Ulster, Coleraine

### Source of Published Findings

Barton, K. C. (2005). "Best not to forget them": Adolescents' judgments of historical significance in Northern Ireland. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 33, 9-44.

### Research Questions

How do secondary students in Northern Ireland make judgments about the significance of historical people, events, and trends? How do Catholic and Protestant students compare in their judgments?

### Rationale

Because conceptions of significance are at the heart of all history (and history education), research on the development of students' ideas about the topic may shed light on their overall frameworks for historical understanding. Comparative studies—in this case of Protestant and Catholic students—can further illustrate the relationship between students' ideas and the social contexts of which they are part. Research in Northern Ireland is particularly valuable because of

the contested nature of the significance of historical events there.

### Methodology

Research was conducted in two secondary schools (one Controlled, one Maintained) in a medium-sized town in rural Northern Ireland. The study involved interviews with 40 students, 4 from each of the 5 grade levels at each school. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview task in which students were asked to choose, from a set of 26 captioned historical pictures, the 10 that they considered most important to include on a timeline of Northern Ireland history, and to explain their choices.

### Main Findings

Students' criteria for selecting events as historically significant reflected the social context of history in Northern Ireland, but for the most part, their ideas were not simple reflections of either Unionist or Nationalist viewpoints. Among students at both schools, the most common reason for selecting an event as historically significant was the extent of death or hardship involved (regardless of the community affected), and in many cases this was explicitly linked to the need for remembrance. Another of the most common themes among

students at both schools was the importance of events that caused contemporary political conflicts or were emblematic of continuing disputes between the two communities. Another frequent explanation, more common among Protestant students, was the role of historical events in creating the demographic and political makeup of Northern Ireland; Catholics, on the other hand, were more likely to stress events that symbolised the need for rights, fairness, and equality. Finally, students from both schools often noted the importance of events that brought Catholics and Protestants together in the past or that had the potential for bringing about peace in the future. Girls, meanwhile, were more likely to emphasise themes of remembrance, cooperation, and inequality, while boys were more likely to refer to community conflict or the political and demographic origins of the state.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

1. Educators in Northern Ireland may be better able to develop students' historical understanding by looking for connections between topics of study and students' prior ideas about significance; students may be more likely to engage with historical topics when they can see their relationship to themes of remembrance, enduring conflict, and so on.
2. Educators in Northern Ireland may wish to consider expanding students' ideas about historical significance so that they can better see the multiple ways in which events may be considered important; otherwise, students may simply assimilate events to their prior ideas of significance without recognising other ways of thinking about those topics.
3. For educators who hope that historical study may contribute to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, the findings of this study are encouraging, because they suggest that young people are not overly committed to sectarian historical perspectives and that they apply their criteria of significance to members of both communities. Educators might capitalise on students' ideas by studying the impact of political violence on both communities, and by highlighting instances of Catholic and Protestant cooperation in history.

# NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE HISTORY CURRICULUM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

**Alan McCully**, University of Ulster and **Keith C. Barton**, University of Cincinnati

## Funding

The research was conducted as part of the UNESCO Programme in Education for Pluralism, Human Rights and Democracy at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, with funding provided by grants from the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, and the University Research Council of the University of Cincinnati. The data was collected in the academic years 2001-02 and 2002-03.

## Source of Published Findings

The analysis of the data to date has been presented in two papers.

Barton, K. C. and McCully, A. W (2005) History, Identity and the School History Curriculum in Northern Ireland: An Empirical Study of Secondary Students' Ideas and Perspectives, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Vol.37, No. 1, 85-116.

Barton K.C. (currently under peer review) "You can form your own point of view": Beyond appropriation and resistance in Northern Ireland students' encounters with history

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## Research Questions

The main research questions were:

- How do young people in Northern Ireland conceptualise their identity in relation to national history?
- How do they respond to the politicised histories they encounter in their communities?
- What impact does the Northern Ireland curriculum have on young people's sense of identity, and how does this change over secondary years 1-3?
- How do students make sense of the competing influences of school and community, and how aware are they of these conflicts and of their own responses to them?

## Rationale

In Northern Ireland history plays an important role in the formation of individual and community identity and this identification often is credited with perpetuating conflict. The Northern Ireland History curriculum, on the other hand, is aimed at providing students with a more balanced understanding of the subject so that by the age of 14, they should have a greater understanding of a variety of cultural and political backgrounds. Although previous research has investigated issues of history and identity in Northern



Ireland, none has focused on the intersection of school and community histories and their competing influences on students' developing ideas about history and identity.

### Methodology

In this cross-sectional study, 253 students, aged 11-14, were interviewed at the end of each of the first three years of the secondary history curriculum. The study employed stratified convenience, cluster sampling that included Maintained (Catholic), Controlled (Protestant), and Integrated schools; selective grammar schools and non-selective secondary schools; and schools in areas that had experienced relatively high levels of conflict and those where conflict was relatively low. Within each school approximately 24 students were interviewed, chosen by teachers to represent a range of achievement levels and evenly spread across each of the three year groups. Slightly more than half the participants (54%) were boys. Interviews began with a picture sorting task, in which pairs of students created groupings of historical images and chose those with which they most identified. This task was followed by a series of open-ended questions which allowed students to elaborate on their ideas about how they had learned about the past and how history is used in and out of school. Interview transcripts were analysed inductively to identify recurring patterns.

### Main Findings

1. Community conflict in Northern Ireland is a strong influence—although not the only one—on students' perceptions of who they are and what is important to them. Although national, political and religious issues were important, they did not dominate students' conceptualisation of their connection to history. Less than a third of students' responses involved choices related to Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist history. Thus, about 70% of the responses involved identification with other aspects of history, including associations with family history, local heritage, the world wars and aspects of social justice and human rights. However, identification with events related to Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist history became more dominant over the course of the three years, as students' choices and explanations had narrowed considerably by the final year of the required history curriculum. By that time, they were much more likely to focus on pictures related to their own national, religious and cultural backgrounds and to use the content they had learned at school to add detail and context to their identifications.
2. Students' identification with history varied by school type, gender, geographic region and selectivity of school. In particular,



- Identification with Unionist or Nationalist history and culture was more common among boys, at secondary schools and in areas of conflict.
  - Identification with the Troubles (as a feature of life rather than with specific parties in the conflict) was higher in non-conflict areas and at grammar and Integrated/non-selective schools
  - Girls at grammar and Integrated/non-selective schools and in non-conflict areas were more likely to identify with Northern Ireland as a region in a non-political way, and less likely to identify with the topic of war or with topics emphasised in the curriculum
  - Students at Maintained (Catholic) schools were more likely to identify with elements from the recent past while those from Controlled (Protestant) schools were more likely to identify with events from the 17th to the early 20th Century.
3. Students encountered multiple sources of historical information and they navigated amongst these in a conscious attempt to refine and extend their historical understanding. Sometimes this led to them to assimilate new knowledge with their existing narrative, and at other times to open up new lines of enquiry. This suggests that the current curriculum may have directly influenced

students' ability to question the authoritative stories of their communities and to base their conclusions on evidence.

Notably,

- Students appreciated school history's commitment to balance as an alternative to the partisan histories they encountered outside school.
- Most were less interested in the purely "academic" side of history than its usefulness in helping them understand the origins of contemporary conflict.
- Students were not simply accepting or rejecting either school or community history but were drawing from each to pursue their own interests.
- Students remained loyal to their original political commitments, but they wanted to reach their own conclusions rather than being compelled to follow what others believed

### Implications for Policy and Practice

#### *Making connections between past and present*

The findings support the view of those who argue for a history curriculum that directly addresses potentially contentious subject matter and draws links with the contemporary situation. It suggests that teachers should directly facilitate students to address the connections between past and present, for without

teacher mediation those connections are likely to be highly selective and uncritical. New approaches may be required to ensure that connections between the study of the past and the exploration of the present are systematically bridged. These should include opportunities for students to understand and deconstruct how background and experience can influence the way individuals interpret the past. It would be beneficial if all students studied the post-1960 history of Northern Ireland.

*Fostering particular dispositions in students through which to frame their engagement with history*

To manage emotional responses that can act as a barrier to critical analysis, teachers should guide students, carefully and systematically, to steadfastly seek clarity and adopt positions based on personal judgment, but also to be comfortable when faced with complexity and confusion and to recognise that all positions must be open to re-interpretation in the light of new knowledge

*Establishing a strong relationship with the Local and Global Citizenship programme*

If the aim that history teaching should contribute to students' participation as reflective citizens of pluralist, democratic societies is accepted, then educators need to develop clearer and more explicit

links between history and Local and Global Citizenship. Without closer attention to such issues, school history is unlikely to have a significant impact on the developing political perspectives of young people.

*The opportunity to study a wider variety of themes and time periods*

The findings indicate that the programme studied at present may appeal more to some groups than others. It would benefit from greater flexibility, including opportunities to study social history where common experiences of the two dominant communities could be explored.

*Challenging the 'symmetrical' approach*

The differences identified among groups call into question the 'symmetrical' approach to teaching history, whereby all schools follow the same curriculum. Students' differing identifications with what is taught suggests history departments should be allowed greater freedom to design programmes that take account of individuals and their needs in the communities in which they live.

# **An exploration of Teaching and Learning Sensitive Issues in History: a comparative study of schools in Northern Ireland and Oxford at Secondary Level.**

**Margaret Conway**, Teacher, formerly a research student at the University of London

## **Source of published findings**

Conway, M. (2004). Identifying the past: An exploration of teaching and learning sensitive issues in history at secondary school level. *Educate*, 4(2).  
Journal online at <http://www.educatejournal.org/>

## **Context**

In the 1980s I was the only Catholic teaching History in a controlled school in Dungannon, Northern Ireland. This was most unusual at a time when sectarian troubles were rife. Then I was frequently asked about my relationship with my Protestant pupils and, particularly, about how I tackled the more contentious topics in Irish history. When, in 1989, I transferred to a Catholic Independent school in Oxford, my difficulties in facing class and cultural differences in the classroom prompted me to ask questions about the nature of sensitivity in History teaching and how teachers can harness their, and their students' emotional crises to teach in a more inspirational and effective manner. These questions became the basis for my PhD Thesis, first at the University of Oxford, then at the Institute of Education, University of London.

## **Rationale**

Much has been written about the part played by history teaching in the construction of national identity and its potential for soothing tensions in a divided or multi-cultural society. However, empirical, comparative research into how teachers and students perceive formal History lessons is limited. Until the early 1990s young people in Northern Ireland could leave school without having studied any Irish history. Before curriculum changes were instigated by the National Curriculum in 1989 it was also possible to study History through to A Level in British schools without having done any modern British History. My work explores how these changes impacted on some teachers and students.

## **Research questions**

I conducted interviews with teachers to ascertain if there were topics that they as educators felt were 'too hot to handle' and if there was a consensus that teaching history in the classroom was inadequate to counter external influences such as the family and friends who may exert a much greater influence on young people. I considered how these questions could be explained by factors which were

external to the classroom such as teaching location, type of school, year of interview and the more personal aspects of religion and/or nationality and professed ideological stance.

### Methodology

Data is drawn from a range of surveys and semi-structured interviews. Comparisons are made between students' and teachers' perceptions in two regions of the UK, Oxford in England and Mid Ulster in Northern Ireland, since 1991. In 1991 I devised questions in a small scale survey that sought to explore a range of students' attitudes towards the teaching process and the topics they were taught. I received 24 replies to the questionnaires I had circulated to past pupils in Northern Ireland and compared them with the responses made by a sixth form History group in Oxford. In 1996 and 2001 I conducted a larger-scale survey, with 1737 respondents who were well-distributed across gender, religion, and school type. In addition, 57 teachers were interviewed, spread across the two regions and over the three years, and including approximately equal numbers of controlled and maintained schools in Northern Ireland and state and independent schools in Oxford. Nearly all the teachers were Heads of Department and nearly all were over 40 years of age.

### Findings

I found that as regards teaching History in schools, no topic is intrinsically sensitive but may become so as a result of the teacher's and/or student's reaction to it. My thesis, therefore, asserts that sensitivity in history is a complex, dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon, which, as a result of being context-based, is located in place, culture and chronology.

A particular concern of Irish teachers interviewed in 1991 was that teaching more contemporary Irish history might 'bring the troubles of the streets into the classroom.' Before the ceasefire of 1994 these worries were very understandable. Many feared the consequences of being forced by the Curriculum to teach Irish History for the first time. Those interviewed in 1996 were less nervous. This appeared to have been due to having had the experience of teaching the new Common Curriculum and realising that it was possible to take the sting out of more contentious issues either by teaching earlier periods or by adopting a more neutral teaching strategy. Frequently, this entailed the presentation of documents that 'spoke for themselves'. Those Irish teachers interviewed in 2001 after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 had brought greater optimism of stability to the province, like their English counterparts, were more likely to refer to the effects of family

breakdown and the role of television and film as being factors competing with the classroom.

The majority of teachers I interviewed in Mid Ulster agreed that it was important to teach topics steeped in contention such as national history; they could provide the necessary corrective to sectarian myths, thereby making some headway at least towards healing community rifts. But most were concerned about how this should be done. Many favoured a version of a neutral chair strategy; only a minority were prepared to make their political and ethical views more explicit. By contrast, it was the teachers in Oxford who tended to be prepared to declare their political or ethical stance. In both areas, when a topic is felt to be emotional, teachers tend to rely more on the use of documents rather than on discussion.

What also emerged was overwhelming agreement that it was factors external to the classroom that were most influential in the formation of the political views of the young. This was true of teachers in Mid-Ulster and Oxford and showed no change over the years 1996 and 2001. Nevertheless, teachers in Northern Ireland, particularly in the earlier cohort, were in varying degrees more cautious about the impact of their History teaching on prejudice reduction.

They also demonstrated a wider range of responses: some credited young people with a high degree of political awareness, others were dismissive of their students' interest in and knowledge of politics. Teachers in both regions in 1996 and 2001 complained that prejudices were closely linked with family background.

The findings appear to indicate that there are discrepancies between teachers' and students' views about the sources that are most influential in the learning process. The trend is for young people not only to enjoy their history lessons at school and to see the subject as being relevant to their lives but, when it comes to their perceptions of who or what has helped them to develop opinions about the history of their country, to consider the classroom to be by far the most important source of influence (and more so NI pupils than pupils in England).

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

It is important that we make the most of our opportunity to exert a positive influence over the minds of the young. If teachers resist being a moral force (and I think we should not), we will surrender to the streets our opportunity to be the primary vehicle for the transmission of critical information. Although the evidence points to the growing influence of television between 1996 and 2001, we can compete with the lessons learnt from the

home, the street and the tabloids. Teachers may be right to be concerned about the adverse influence of relatives and television: certainly this opinion was reinforced by interviews I did with students. But it must not be overlooked that, for the majority of students, History classes in school were perceived to be by far the most influential source in the process of learning the history of their country.

History teachers ought to be congratulated and encouraged by my findings. It is apparent that

the trend is for young people to enjoy their History lessons at school. They also see the subject as being relevant to their lives. Moreover, when it comes to their perceptions of who or what has helped them to develop opinions about the history of their country, the classroom is by far the most important source of influence in both regions. If teachers are not made aware of the positive feedback they receive from students they may be less confident about tackling sensitive topics such as national history.

## Teaching history in Northern Ireland: creating an oasis of calm?

**Alison Kitson**, Programme Leader, Training and Development Agency for Schools/ formerly Lecturer in History Education and Teacher Development, University of Warwick.

### Funding

Research fellowship funded by the Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs. This particular research project formed one of several case studies for a broader project entitled 'History education and the politics of social reconciliation', the findings of which can be found in the publication listed below.

### Source of published findings

Kitson, A. (forthcoming), 'Teaching history in Northern Ireland: creating an oasis of calm?' in Cole, L. (ed) Teaching the Violent Past: Reconciliation and History Education, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham

### Research Questions

- To what extent is the history curriculum in Northern Ireland contributing to social reconciliation?
- Is an enquiry-based approach to history teaching well established in schools, and in any case, is it sufficient?
- Do history teachers fight shy of tackling controversial issues and linking the past with the present?

### Rationale

The history curriculum in Northern Ireland is often highly regarded by other societies in, or recently emerging from, conflict. Two features are praised in particular: a prescribed curriculum which ensures that all children, regardless of community, are taught a broadly common programme which includes Irish history in a British and European framework and an enquiry-based approach to teaching which enables pupils to engage with different perspectives. Indeed, blatant partisanship is hard to find in either textbooks or classrooms. Popular opinion amongst senior history educators in Northern Ireland, however, is that teachers tend to 'play safe', both in terms of what they teach and how they teach it, and therefore do not always exploit history's contribution to social reconciliation. For example, whilst their pupils may use a range of evidence and be alerted to multiple interpretations, some teachers may not actively encourage their pupils genuinely to engage and connect with alternative perspectives. Similarly, opportunities to connect the past with the present – perhaps by referring to contemporary murals depicting



historical events or figures – may frequently be missed and certain highly controversial events and figures may be missed out altogether. This research project sought to establish if there was any truth in this hypothesis and if so, to explain why.

### Methodology

The study is based on four main sets of data collected between June 2002 and September 2003. First, relevant documentation about schools and the curriculum in Northern Ireland was scrutinised. Second, a series of interviews was carried out with senior figures in Northern Irish history education. Third, a sample of history textbooks, mainly written and published for a specifically Northern Irish market, were analysed in terms of their content and underlying pedagogy. Finally, case studies of eight post-primary (secondary) schools were carried out, consisting of lesson observations and taped interviews with at least one teacher in each school. Whilst these schools did not represent a true sample, they nevertheless represented the different types of schools which exist in Northern Ireland for pupils aged 11 to 18 years.

### Main Findings

The findings suggest that teachers – and textbooks – are committed to providing a reasonably balanced view of history, as far as this is possible. However, they also supported the hypothesis that the potential of history to explore, understand and question the roots of conflict in Northern Ireland is not always fully realised.

Although the textbooks succeed in presenting a largely balanced account of Irish history and are characterised by a careful and sensitive use of language, they tend to stop short of asking the more challenging questions and contain virtually no explicit links between the present situation and its historical antecedents. Pupils are left to make such links by themselves. Furthermore, there is an absence of a genuinely enquiry-based approach. The questions and activities contained in the textbooks are often lower-order and require skills of comprehension rather than of analysis and problem-solving. This is particularly the case in textbooks aimed primarily at lower attaining pupils.

The most striking feature of the case studies was that, despite a common curriculum, the history education that pupils in each school received was distinctive and unique. The teachers differed, for example, in their readiness to make past-present



connections and in the way they sought to explore different historical perspectives with their pupils. Some felt that only older, or higher attaining pupils were ready to study the most controversial issues, particularly those after 1922, whilst others regarded this as a waste and a missed opportunity to make history relevant and meaningful to the pupils, regardless of their age and ability. Fundamentally, the teachers differed in the emphasis they placed on history's intrinsic and extrinsic purposes<sup>1</sup> and the extent to which they were prepared to be explicit in challenging misconceptions, tackling controversial issues and relating the past to the present. One of the teachers interviewed felt very strongly that his job was to 'create an oasis of calm' and not to 'stir up old winds' in a part of the province overwhelmed by tensions.

Several factors were found to explain the differences between teachers, other than through biographies (which would, in itself, be a fascinating research project). The location of the school was one obvious factor which impinged on teachers' views. The teachers working in conflict 'hot-spots' were less likely to tackle controversial and recent events head-on. The other crucial factor was that of pupil ability. The teachers working in high (non-selective) schools were generally less ambitious in their aims than those working in grammar (selective)

schools. When these two factors – location and ability of pupils – were put together, the impact on teaching and learning was particularly evident. The teachers who were more likely to 'play safe' in their teaching often worked in high schools in urban areas of conflict. Interestingly, it is in these types of schools that pupils' increasingly selective use of the past at Key Stage 3 (years 11-14) to justify the perspective of their 'tradition' is most acute according to recent research.<sup>2</sup>

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

There are institutional features which hamper teachers' readiness to take risks, including the selective system and the continued dominance of segregated education. Such features extend beyond history classrooms, but this research suggests that they are fundamental reasons why the rhetoric and the reality of the history curriculum often diverge. The ongoing violence in parts of the province also makes the job of the history teacher a potentially fraught one. What, then, can be done to support teachers?

Teachers need support and encouragement in order to take risks in their classrooms. This needs to come from four quarters: curriculum arrangements, teacher training, continuing professional development and classroom resources. Underpinning these elements should be a re-

evaluation of what is meant by enquiry-based learning. Providing pupils with a range of sources from which to draw conclusions may not be sufficient. A more direct, explicit and often affective approach may be necessary. Teachers need to be equipped with the right kinds of resources and teaching strategies to do this.

They also need to feel that they are engaged in a collective endeavour, supported by colleagues within and beyond their schools. The implementation of the new curriculum in September 2007 presents an opportunity to do exactly this, if it is supported by some high quality, history-specific professional development.

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# Presenting the Past or Shaping the Future: An Investigation into Current Issues in Post-primary History Education

**Catherine Thompson**, Advisory Officer for History and Citizenship, Belfast Education and Library Board

## Funding

This research was conducted as part of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Education in the Graduate School of Education, Queen's University, Belfast. Catherine Thompson, Advisory Officer for History and Citizenship, Belfast Education and Library Board, 40 Academy Street, Belfast. BT1 2NQ.

## Rationale

This study explored a range of general issues relating to history education but specifically focused on the role and purpose of history teaching at Key Stage 3. The research was conducted in the context of major curricular revision - which demanded a reassessment of the value of all subjects and the extent to which they prepared students for life and work – and an emerging peace process, which appeared to provide a climate within which students could be encouraged to confront and challenge 'popular' history. It has been argued that history can and should contribute to the healing process in divided communities and support political and societal change, yet this is rarely highlighted in school aims or in the planning of individual teachers.

Academic research has been critical of the contribution that

history education has made to society in Northern Ireland. It has been claimed that history teachers are 'too balanced' in their approach to controversial aspects of history, that they do not link the past with the present and neglect opportunities to contribute to social reconciliation.

In light of this, it seemed appropriate that the perceptions of history teachers about the role and purpose of history teaching should be explored.

## Research Questions

- What is the core purpose in teaching history?
- Does history teaching have a role to play in promoting reconciliation in Northern Ireland?
- What has been the impact of the statutory curriculum?
- How does history relate to other areas – e.g. Local and Global Citizenship?

## Methodology

This study examined the views of eight experienced heads of history departments in a range of post-primary schools. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers from secondary and grammar schools representing the controlled, maintained and integrated sectors.

## **Main Findings**

This research revealed a mismatch between the official aspiration of what history could help deliver and what teachers think is possible or important to do in the classroom. Student enjoyment, engagement with the subject and the development of skills were considered to be the most important outcomes for history lessons.

On the whole, this study supported the notion that teachers 'play safe' in the history classroom, avoid controversial topics and fail to exploit opportunities to promote social reconciliation. The reasons for this were varied. Some teachers believed that their capacity to influence students' ideas was limited and therefore it was futile to try. Others feared creating difficult and unmanageable situations in the classroom. Some teachers felt that challenging presumptions and misconceptions was simply beyond their role and remit. While teachers recognised that a more stable political environment was evolving, they argued that micro-politics in the communities within which the schools are situated had not changed significantly and indeed, in some cases had become more unstable. This made it difficult to deal with some topics in the classroom without risking an emotional response from the students.

Some teachers did express a desire to do more challenging work in the classroom but felt constrained by a lack of support or inadequate resources and skills. Interestingly, the teachers who were most comfortable in dealing with controversial topics were those who had been involved in the Local and Global Citizenship training programme and were able to apply methodologies acquired to their history lessons.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this study was the existence of a huge gap between, on the one hand, the view of the Department of Education and academia - that history should promote positive values and social reconciliation - and, on the other hand, the view of the teachers - that priority should be given to developing skills and promoting interest and enjoyment in the subject. Given that the history curriculum was one of the first areas of education on which a critical eye was cast at the outbreak of the political violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and that there have been numerous discussions and debates on the role of the history curriculum, it is somewhat surprising that this gap between official aspiration and classroom level pragmatism still exists. Nevertheless, the evidence here points clearly to this as a key problem.

If the potential of history education as a tool for social reconciliation is to be realised, there needs to be consensus that this is a primary objective. This highlights the need for a wider debate involving the entire community of history educators in a process of seeking clarification and agreement on the role and purpose of history education. Furthermore, teachers must be equipped with the skills, strategies and support essential for this kind of work

It would seem that the imminent implementation of a revised curriculum offers an opportunity to begin to explore these possibilities with teachers. The

professional training for teachers, new resources and approaches which will accompany the revised curriculum have the potential to breathe new life into the subject. It is up to all involved in history education to help maximise the potential that it offers. As one teacher argued,

**The history our pupils learn today will shape how they make history tomorrow. That's why I feel I've got to do my bit to help them to be more understanding, more tolerant of people different to themselves, to show them they can make a better history than the one we've experienced here for the last thirty years.**

# Complementary or contradictory? History teachers' views on school History and the introduction of Local and Global Citizenship into the Northern Ireland Curriculum

**John McCombe**, History Department, Belfast Royal Academy (UNESCO Research student, School of Education, University of Ulster at Coleraine, 2002-2006)

## Funding

The research upon which this report is based was conducted as part of the author's doctoral research studies at the UNESCO Centre at the University of Ulster, Coleraine. The research scholarship was funded by DEL

## Research Questions

The research addressed the following research questions:

- What are the views of history teachers on the introduction of Local and Global Citizenship into the Northern Ireland Curriculum?
- What are the views of history teachers on curriculum collaboration between History and Local and Global Citizenship(LGC)?
- Why do teachers hold these views?

## Background

There has been much academic debate surrounding the relationship between school History and Citizenship education. Phillips<sup>1</sup> highlighted three main dimensions of the History/Citizenship relationship:

- complementary aims, methodology and purpose (such as the appreciation of a range of different interpretations);

- a similar place for values (such as tolerance and mutual understanding) in both subjects;
- the opportunity History provides for the exploration of Citizenship-related topics and concepts (such as the origins and development of democratic government).

However, the discourse surrounding the role of school History in Citizenship education (and vice versa) has been mainly conducted by academics and is, therefore, largely theoretical in nature. This study was designed to inform the debate with empirical data; namely, the views of History teachers.

This research can also be located within the local educational context where the proposals for the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) include, not only the introduction of LGC, but also an increased emphasis on collaboration between the different 'subject strands' of which the revised curriculum will consist. This study explores the potential for such collaboration to manifest itself with regard to two of these 'subject strands', namely, History and LGC.

## Methodology

This study incorporated the use of two different research methods. One element of the study consisted of twenty in-depth interviews with a sample of History teachers. The second element of the study consisted of a questionnaire survey. A questionnaire was sent to each post-primary History teachers in Northern Ireland in the spring of 2005. In total, 221 questionnaires were completed and returned (out of an estimated population of approximately 550). The estimated response rate was therefore 40.2%.

Both samples consisted of teachers who work in a wide range of educational contexts and included teachers who work in secondary schools and grammar schools, the controlled and maintained sectors as well as teachers who work in integrated schools. The use of both in-depth interviews and a questionnaire survey means that the findings outlined below have been developed from both a small number of intensive discussions and a large number of (albeit less in-depth) contributions from History teachers from a wide range of contexts on the subject under investigation.

## Findings

Northern Ireland's History teachers hold a wide range of perspectives on the idea of collaboration between History and LGC. While the majority of teachers interviewed and surveyed were enthusiastic about the introduction of Citizenship education and the contribution History can make to this, others expressed reservations.

Both the interviews and the questionnaire survey indicate that that the introduction of LGC and the idea of History/Citizenship collaboration will be received positively by a significant number of History teachers when it is introduced as a statutory element of the NIC in September 2007. Over two-thirds (69.1%) of the respondents to the questionnaire survey stated that they were in favour of History/Citizenship collaboration.

Three issues were fundamental in shaping teachers' overall opinions on History's role in collaborating with LGC. These issues were:

1. the extent to which the rationale for LGC complements that of History;
2. the extent to which LGC complements History in terms of its subject matter, skills, pedagogies and values;
3. the practical implications of the introduction of LGC, particularly the diminution of History's status in post-primary schools.



Those teachers who forwarded the idea that the rationale, subject matter, skills, pedagogies and values of LGC complemented those already being practised in History favoured the prospect of collaboration between the two subjects. The only potential pitfall expressed by some of these teachers was that the practical implications of Citizenship's introduction (in areas such as timetabling and resource allocation) might impact negatively on the position on History in their schools. However, their overall position was that History had been able to 'hold its own' during previous reforms of the curriculum and there was no reason why it could not do so again.

The teachers who expressed reservations about History/LGC collaboration were those who perceived Citizenship's rationale to be contradictory to their rationale for teaching History. One interviewee suggested that LGC had both an 'official rationale' and an 'underlying current'. This teacher elaborated on this idea by commenting that while the language of the curriculum documents relating to LGC is acceptable, the real reason the subject is being introduced is a desire on the part of the government to promote 'a set of liberal values that everybody should subscribe to' and the idea

that 'there's certain ways to think that are right and certain ways that are wrong'. This teacher stated that she was uncomfortable with the prospect of being involved in a venture that was being driven by this 'underlying current'.

This research found that Northern Ireland's History teachers are in favour, both of the introduction of LGC, and in engaging in curriculum collaboration with it. The factors that contributed to this positive response include History teachers perceiving the objectives of LGC as being compatible with those of their subject, a recognition of the numerous 'cross-overs' in subject matter and a high level of confidence in their ability to handle the potentially controversial issues that are included in the LGC programme.

However, not all History teachers share these perceptions. A number of teachers expressed reservations about the rationale behind the introduction of LGC and perceived an 'underlying current' of government sponsored social engineering in the initiative. Others were less concerned about this, arguing instead that all state education is influenced by a desire to persuade young people to adopt particular values and modes of behaviour but that as long as this contributed to the common good there was no reason to oppose it.



### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings from this study are encouraging for those who argue that schools have an important role to play in responding to Northern Ireland's divided society. LGC represents the latest of a number of curricular initiatives that have been introduced into the Northern Ireland education system since the onset of 'the Troubles' in the late 1960s. However, those responsible for developing LGC

have learnt from the experience of these previous initiatives and created a programme that has the potential to contribute to the process of cross-community reconciliation in Northern Ireland. While the challenges posed by LGC may only come to the fore once it is implemented across all schools in 2007-8, it is encouraging that the History teaching community has, at this stage, adopted such a positive view of it.

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## Teachers, Students, and History Education in Northern Ireland: a commentary on the research studies

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John Whyte<sup>1</sup> once suggested that for its size, Northern Ireland must be one of the most researched areas in the world. Residents have even been known to complain that it's difficult to watch the parades anymore because anthropologists crowd out the local populace. In the field of history education, though, there's a curious imbalance. On the one hand, the perpetuation of Northern Ireland's conflict is often attributed to partisan views of the past, and educational reforms have often been credited with the power to contribute to a more peaceful society. Indeed, as Alison Kitson notes in her research summary, Northern Ireland is regarded internationally as a model for how history should be taught in a conflict-ridden society. Yet until recently, there had been few empirical studies of how history actually is taught in the region, or what teachers and students here think about the subject. Those who hope to uncover patterns in the development of history teaching in Northern Ireland, or to identify changes since the introduction of a national curriculum in 1990, search in vain for previous studies. There are observations, anecdotes, and reminiscences—but very little in the way of systematic research. This situation has begun to change over the past decade, as a

number of carefully designed and systematically implemented studies of history education have been carried out in Northern Ireland, and many of those studies are represented by the research summaries which follow. These have not been part of a single research programme but have depended on the individual interests of scholars from a variety of settings—coming not only from Northern Ireland but also from England and the United States, some working on masters or doctoral theses, others conducting their own grant-funded investigations. Such diversity is a strength of this body of research, for it contributes to the reliability of the findings: No study by itself can ever be definitive, but when separate studies, conducted with a variety of purposes and methodologies, point in the same direction, we can feel more confident that their findings deserve attention. One thing which the researchers represented here do have in common, though, is that nearly all have been history teachers themselves. This familiarity with the daily realities of trying to help students learn about the past serves as an important corrective to the temptation to present explanations which do not accord with the experiences of practitioners, or to provide suggestions which are so

impractical as to be unworkable (or which are simply irrelevant to the world of practice). These studies have been conducted with an eye toward improving the experiences of students and teachers in Northern Ireland, and they are grounded in their authors' own experiences in schools. It is to be hoped that this combination of commitment, experience, and research will render this body of work more than a set of academic exercises, and will yield information and perspectives which will be useful to educators in a variety of roles.

### **Why educational research?**

Newcomers to educational research often share a misconception about the nature and purpose of such investigations: They assume that educational research attempts to evaluate programmes or practices to find out what effect they have—to 'prove what works,' as some people say. And when they come across a study which does not prove what works, they dismiss it as irrelevant or inconclusive. The entire field of educational research is sometimes characterised as less useful than other applied research, such as that in medicine. But although some educational research does evaluate the effect of teaching practices or educational projects, much of it has a more basic goal: to find out what happens in classrooms. This is the first step toward improving educational practice.

The analogy with medical research is relevant here, for not all medical studies evaluate specific drugs or treatments; those are subfields known as pharmaceutical and clinical research. Most medical research, in fact, aims at uncovering how illnesses operate—how pathogens are transmitted, for example, how they develop within other organisms, and how they interact chemically with their hosts. Testing a specific drug or treatment can be accomplished only after many years (usually decades) of previous research into what happens when diseases enter the body. This kind of research usually begins with case studies of small groups of patients, as doctors describe in careful detail how symptoms develop, so that they can identify common patterns in the progression of a disease. Only then does laboratory research begin—without initial case studies, laboratory researchers wouldn't know what to look for. So too with educational research: Before researchers can develop programmes or practices and test their effect, they must know what happens in the world of education—how students think, what teachers do, and how the two interact. And just as in medicine, these investigations often begin with case studies of small groups of teachers and students. Particularly in a field as new as research on history education (and specifically, history education in Northern Ireland), we

need detailed studies of teaching and learning as a foundation for educational policies and practices. Such studies help us better understand the factors which influence teachers' and students' encounters with the curriculum. This kind of research is particularly valuable when it helps teachers or educational policymakers move beyond their own experiences—by revealing aspects of schooling they had never considered or by providing evidence which challenges their untested (and often unstated) assumptions.

That is what the studies summarised here do: they investigate students' thinking, teachers' ideas, or (to lesser extent) classroom practices. Most involve in-depth interviews, although some rely on surveys, either alone or in combination with interviews. And while several aim at describing the nuance and variation among a small number of participants, others include samples of hundreds or even thousands of students or teachers, in order to gain a broader view of trends throughout the region. Despite differences in their design and in the specific questions they ask, however, these studies all find important gaps in the practice of history education in Northern Ireland—either gaps between policy and practice, or between students' ideas and adults' perceptions of their students' thinking. It is these gaps which deserve particular attention.

### **Gaps in history education in Northern Ireland**

One of the most obvious gaps revealed in these studies is that between views of teachers and those of educational policymakers—or as Kitson puts it, between the 'rhetoric and reality' of the history curriculum. Although those who have designed the curriculum may assume that one of its goals is to promote social reconciliation in Northern Ireland, teachers are cautious of this role and sometimes dismiss it altogether. Catherine Thompson, for example, found that teachers did not feel it was their responsibility to further such efforts or to challenge popular histories. Similarly, John McCombe found that some teachers—albeit a minority—found the perceived goals of the citizenship curriculum to be contradictory to those of history teaching, and that even those who were more positive about the integration of the two subjects were clear that teaching toward citizenship was acceptable only to the extent which it complemented the goals of history—citizenship, that is, might follow from history teaching but could not lead it.

This gap between the 'planned curriculum' and the 'implemented curriculum' is especially clear in studies by Kitson and by Margaret Conway. Conway found that the teachers she interviewed in 1991 were resistant to bringing controversial issues into the classroom, but that by 1996 they

were more positive about introducing such topics. However, teachers' greater acceptance of controversial topics was due largely to the fact that they had discovered how to teach about such topics in non-threatening (and arguably non-challenging) ways—by focusing on earlier time periods, by emphasising documents which 'spoke for themselves', and by removing their own point of view from the discussion. This same tendency was clear in Kitson's research: She found that teachers did not fully accept the need to 'stir up old wounds', and that when implementing the curriculum they 'played safe' by not actively encouraging students to engage with alternative perspectives, by rarely connecting past and present, and by avoiding the most controversial events and figures altogether. She also found that textbooks failed to ask challenging questions or to make connections with the present, and that their use of sources often amounted to comprehension exercises rather than the kind of analysis and problem-solving that would be characteristic of a more genuinely enquiry-based approach.

These findings should not, however, be interpreted as examples of unprofessional teachers simply refusing to accept their responsibilities, much less of partisan teachers attempting to subvert the curriculum. Kitson, for example, found no blatant partisanship in either textbooks or

classrooms, and Thompson found that teachers were committed to engaging students with history, promoting their enjoyment of the subject, and developing their historical skills. McCombe also found that most teachers were enthusiastic about citizenship education and history's contribution to it. But what is clear is that teachers are not simple conduits for official curriculum goals, and that they will teach in ways which are consistent with their own understanding of the proper nature of their subject. Any attempts at bringing about changes in history teaching, then, must take into account teachers' perspectives.

A second gap which has become clear from these studies is the discrepancy between students' ideas and adults' perceptions of their thinking. It is often asserted that children in Northern Ireland begin to learn partisan historical narratives at an early age. But my research with both primary and secondary students shows that although they do learn about history from many sources outside school, students' ideas about history are by no means dominated by politicised stories of the national past. Primary children have a variety of historical interests, and Alan McCully's and my research shows that these continue as they enter the secondary level; moreover, although those at the secondary level certainly are interested in

the Troubles—both their origins and their more recent development—students' interests are not solely focused on their own political or religious communities. Instead, they expect to learn how community differences have come about, and they are concerned with the sufferings experienced by both Protestants and Catholics.

Not only are students' historical perspectives broader than many people assume, their expectations for the outcome of learning history at school are more optimistic than those of their teachers. Both Conway and Margaret Smith, for example, found that teachers were skeptical about the ability of school history to overcome prejudices developed in homes and communities, and Kitson found that some teachers felt that only older or higher-achieving pupils were capable of studying the most controversial issues; Kitson also found that textbooks for lower-achieving pupils were particularly prone to rely on comprehension exercises rather than higher-order thinking. Yet McCully and I found that many students, across all types of schools, expected that history would help them develop a better understanding of the other community and would allow them to make up their own minds about controversial issues; they saw the curriculum as an important corrective to the one-sided stories they felt were prominent outside school, and they were confident in

their ability to deal with such conflicting information. Conway also found that students not only enjoyed school history but considered it personally relevant, and they considered school to be the most important influence on their ideas about the past.

It seems, then, that teachers may underestimate their potential influence on students' developing historical understanding, and the result may be that they are missing an important opportunity to extend students' ideas, particularly during early adolescence. Despite the fact that students are open to new perspectives, that is, many teachers appear reluctant to engage in the kinds of history teaching that might develop their thinking in the ways that students themselves expect. Notably, McCully and I found that students' identification with their own community's past increased during the first three years of secondary schooling—the years when the study of history is required—and some students appear to be drawing selectively from the school curriculum to bolster these developing identifications. Given that Smith found older students were even less likely to encounter topics that might challenge their ideas, the period of required historical study (key stages one to three) seems especially important. Students come to secondary school with a variety of historical interests and identifications, and they expect school to help them

deal with the controversial past they see all around them. But instead, by keeping controversy at arm's length, teachers may be inadvertently surrendering to influences outside the school— influences which they are uniquely qualified to challenge, and which students expect them to confront.

### Conclusions

The research summarised here illustrates the complexity of teaching history in Northern Ireland. Of course, those in the region are likely already to have had a more complicated view of this endeavour than some outsiders may have. But by illuminating gaps between policy and practice, and between students' thinking and adult expectations, these studies may alert educators to some of the untested assumptions they bring

to the task. Those who are concerned with history education will certainly want to locate the original sources and read them in their entirety. While all the authors represented here make recommendations for improving history education in Northern Ireland, readers will nonetheless have to consider these suggestions in light of their own experiences and values. Educational research by itself can never simply determine what should be done, but if it leads educators to reflect more deeply on their practices, then it will have served its purpose admirably.

### References

1. John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, vii.





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